

Budget Tidbits... just the facts

Senate Republican Caucus

Budget Brief #4: (2/9/07)

The Myth of the Education Budget

This brief examines the Governor's claim that hers is an "education, education, education" budget.¹

A. Rhetoric or Results?

Every Governor going back 25 years has declared their budget to be an "Education Budget." Despite such apparent single-minded focus, the following are true:

- Over 1/4 of high school students dropout or fail to graduate on time.
 - Only 1/2 of high school students pass the WASL.
- Over 1/3 of students directly entering college require remedial coursework.²

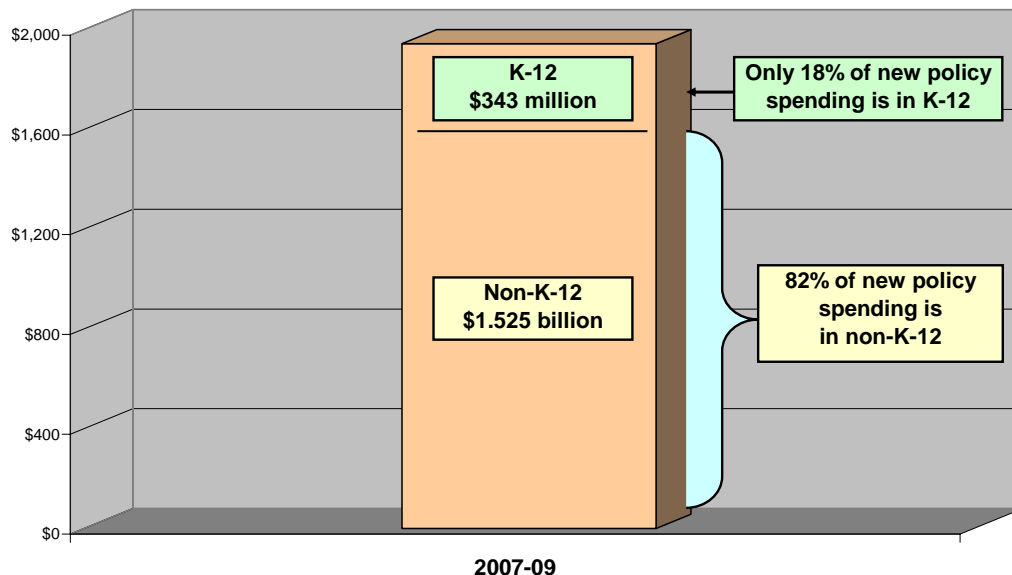
Is Gov. Gregoire's claim that hers is an "education, education, education" budget mere rhetoric, or can we expect significant and real improvements in student learning and performance?

B. Governor Does Not Put Education First in Terms of Dollars

Very Little of Proposed New Policy Spending Going to K-12

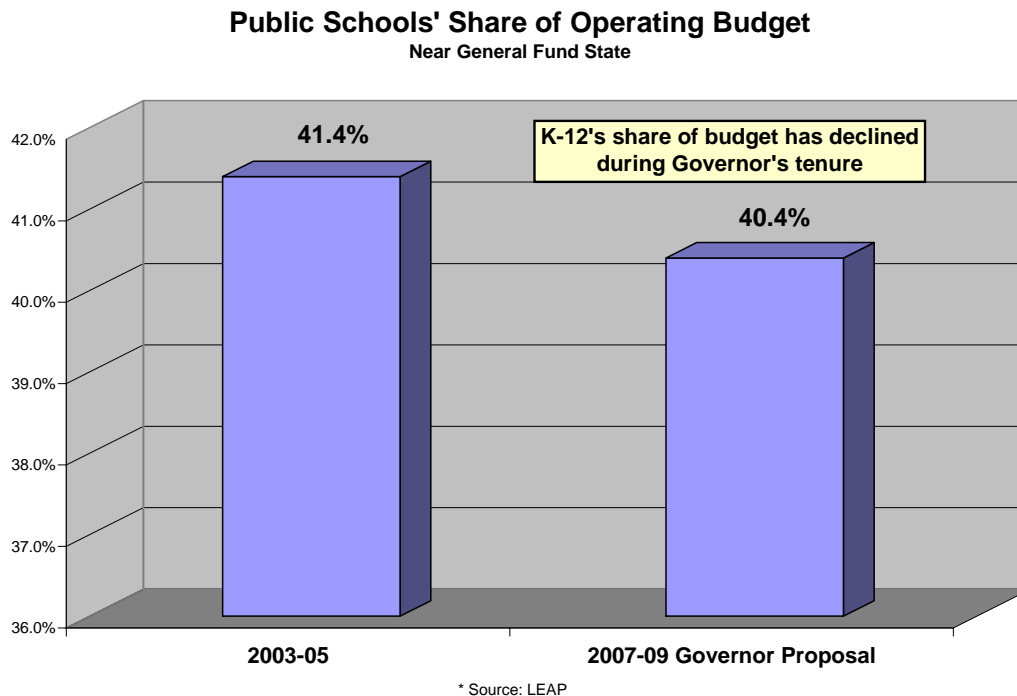
Net New Policy Spending in Governor's Budget

\$1.868 Billion -- Near General Fund



* Source: LEAP, Governor's Proposed 2007-09 Operating Budget (Errata)

Public Schools' Share of Budget has Declined during Gov. Gregoire's Tenure



C. Much of Governor's New Spending is Likely Ineffectual

- Professional Development (\$40 M) – Proposes more professional development days for math/science teachers. Yet there's no accountability as to what days must entail; teachers may turn in a work slip w/no training received. As a UW researcher quoted, "There is a growing body of opinion among 'experts' that the conventional forms of professional development are virtually a waste of time."³
- Math Class Size (\$90 M) – Proposes reducing secondary math class size by three students. Fine idea, only one problem: who will teach the new classes? Only half of math instruction is currently taught by teachers certified and trained in that subject.⁴
- More WASL Remediation (\$12 M, on top of \$40 M base) – Proposes more summer school tutoring for high school students who fail the WASL. Yet enrollment is voluntary and given the governor's removal of the math WASL as a graduation requirement, how many students are likely to enroll?
- Assorted Odds and Ends – Proposes millions for Principal Leadership Academy, a College Readiness test for 11th graders, administrative math/science specialists, a Health Career Academy, and a tool to identify districts in financial distress.

D. A "True" Education Budget: Reform Incentives in Public Schools

The fundamental problem with the governor's K-12 budget is that core public school incentives – or lack thereof – go unchanged and unexamined. A budget that put quality learning first would do the following:

1. Reward Excellence

Excellence is not rewarded in education. Higher pay is based on seniority and degrees, not student achievement or teacher quality. And, unlike other jobs, there is little opportunity for advancement.

- This has at least three ramifications: *one*, there is little incentive outside of personal satisfaction for professional improvement; *two*, resources are misallocated from an educational standpoint: money is not directed to those doing the best job educating students; and *three*, it discourages new entrants to the profession, particularly in areas in high-demand in the private market (math/science).

2. Eliminate Perverse School Finance Incentives

State school financing contains incentives that punish success and encourage fraud. Two examples:

- **Bilingual Education** – Districts receive extra funding for each bilingual student and lose those funds when students transition out of the program. Program growth far exceeds what the census of non-English speakers would forecast. A prime cause is increased length of stay: 28 percent are on longer than three years, triple the rate twenty years ago.⁵ With a disincentive for transition, such a result should not be a surprise. But it is a disservice to students.
- **Free and Reduced Price Lunch** – The state provides additional funds to districts for free and reduced price lunch-eligible students, totaling over \$150 M a biennium. Districts have a strong incentive to sign people up but little incentive to verify eligibility. Despite a decline in the statewide poverty rate, the percent of students districts certify as free/reduced eligible has climbed from 31 percent to 37 percent in the last decade.⁶ A recent selective audit in Pierce County resulted in the discontinuance of benefits for over 80 percent of students.⁷

3. Hold Accountable Poor Performance

It is virtually impossible to get rid of incompetent teachers. Failing to do one's job – educate students – rarely results in dismissal. Principals and fellow teachers in every district know the good from the bad, the competent from the incompetent. Yet the system inhibits removal of those who cannot do the job. This is an affront to quality educators, students and parents. The system should not reward and protect bad teachers at the expense of children.

4. Ensure Textbooks and Learning Materials Help Students Reach State Standards

Anecdotal stories abound that a barrier facing students in math is the advent of “fuzzy math,” or textbooks that do not align with state learning standards. This was recently confirmed by a Washington State Institute for Public Policy study that found *just slightly over half* of math textbooks in grades 4-12 were adequate to ensure students met state standards.⁸

5. Foster Competition

Schools largely have a captive market and are insulated from competition, except on the margin. The incentive to improve in order to attract and retain customers is absent. Policies that foster competition – amongst even just public schools – should be encouraged.

Bottom Line

After 25 years of “Education Budgets,” is there any reason to think Gov. Gregoire’s latest proposal will lead to better student learning than prior claims? Is there, in fact, a better way?

1. Seattle Times, 12/19/06, written by David Ammons (“Gregoire unveils \$30 billion budget, focuses on education”)
2. OSPI Report Card (05-06): 74% on-time graduation; 11/08/06 release – 56% WASL passage; Washington Learns (10/10/05) -- 36% remediation
3. “Frozen Assets: Rethinking Teacher Contracts Could Free Billions for School Reform”, Marguerite Roza (Ed Sector Repts, Jan. 2007), p. 4
4. “World Class Education: Math & Science,” Gov. Gregoire Policy Brief, Dec. 2006.
5. See Budget Tidbit: Bilingual Education (2/8/05), citing Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Jan ‘05
6. OSPI Report Card: comparing May 2006 to October 1996
7. OSPI email from George Sneller, 1/24/07. Of 474 individuals checked, 398 had their enrollment discontinued due to non-response or deemed ineligible.
8. WSIPP, “Textbook Alignment with Washington State Learning Standards: Summary of OSPI’s Review”, Jan. ‘07